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Introduction

Do women's accounts of their leadership practices in services for young children and their families tell a different "story" to those promoted in official government guidance, standards and policy? How much do we *know* about how women lead in this part of our public services? These questions have been raised in an empirical study of identity and practice engaging individuals "leading" within Sure Start Children's Centre services in the North East of England. These Early Years centres represent an alternative site for the study of women's leadership, offering an insight into their work in complex, multi professional, community based settings. Asking questions about women's leadership practices in the Early Years is of critical importance, given the general lack of empirical research into leadership practices within the Early Years sector (Muijs *et al.* 2004) and the growing influence of officially sanctioned "managerial" or "educational" expectations for leadership philosophy and practice in this area which women (in the main) are required to deliver. In the light of this, by exploring leadership through the alternative sites of Sure Start Children's Centre services and women leading these Early Years services, the paper argues that women's leadership practices in this setting represent a creative subversion of "official" leadership cultures and show an ability to deal with complexity, ethical dilemmas and the need to adapt.

Insights are offered into "narrative practices" of women leading in Early Years services which represent a form of women's leadership that is highly relational, ethical, responsive and capable of dealing with complexity. It is also suggested that the narratives of leadership provided - given the context - represent a creative subversion and reworking of a dominant leadership culture (Woodrow and Busch, 2008) often found in the sector, one in which the relational nature of leadership is neglected. However, instead of a simplistic call for more "kind" and "ethical" forms of leadership, it is suggested that the current focus on the leading of attainment, performance and impact within the sector fails to highlight the relational skills and strategies required to achieve them.

The paper begins with the UK Early Years context and understandings of leadership and leadership practices, followed by a discussion of the research design. The findings are then presented followed by discussion of specific insights noting ways in which these insights enrich the field in relation to women and leadership.

The UK early years Sector: sure start children's centres

The UK Early Years sector, including Sure Start Children's Centres continues to be at the centre of popular and political attention, located at the focus of a key set of societal and economic issues such as changing patterns of employment for women and men, concerns about child abuse and educational attainment and persistent inequality. This ensures the "Early Years" remains (for changing political reasons) something which requires intervention by the state, or if the contemporary localism and "Big Society" agenda is read (Lowndes and Pratchett, 2012), action by the state to support action by civil society. Consequently, this is a high profile agenda, important to central and local government policy makers and managers, who are keen to ensure key policies concerning childcare, early intervention and educational

attainment are delivered. It is argued that this interest in the “Early Years” as a policy area by senior leaders brings with it implicit and unquestioned leadership orthodoxies through the operation of bureaucracy and associated masculine rationality (Ferguson, 1984, p. 42; Ross-Smith and Kornberger, 2004) as the ‘Early Years’ becomes big business to large organisations. To say Early Years initiatives such as Sure Start Children’s Centres, which are the leadership site for the study discussed in this article, simply operate within a “feminine” leadership paradigm is to ignore the broader leadership culture they exist within.

UK Sure Start Children’s Centres have a stated “core purpose” of:

“Improving outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged families, in order to reduce inequalities in child development and school readiness; Supported by improved: parenting aspirations, self esteem and parenting skills; [and] child and family health and life chances.” (4 Children Early Years Team, 2012)

The Centres have been “rolled out” in three phases, starting in 2004, but followed the high profile implementation and national evaluation of Sure Start Local Programmes, the first phase of which began in 1999 (Eisenstadt, 2011). It is worth noting that this part of the Early Years sector in England has been subject to intense policy interest and has in many ways been a “test bed” within which to experiment and develop new forms of work with children and families (Ibid). This focus has supported the creation of leadership standards and philosophies for Early Years settings – such as the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (National College for School Leadership, 2012). Women as leaders in Early Years settings are under researched (Muijs, Aubrey *et al.* 2004) and there is much to be learnt as to how women (and men) who have worked in this “test bed” have shaped their own leadership practices. It could be argued that policy and guidance in this area represents a corporate, governmental view of what leadership is and how it should be practiced, whereas the voices and experiences of women as leaders have not been sufficiently heard, or their practices understood. This study aims to contribute towards addressing this marginalization and aims to explore women’s experiences of leading within UK Sure Start Children’s Centres.

Leadership

“Leadership” here is used to describe a range of tasks, actions and relationships traditionally associated with leadership, management and aspects of administration. UK Early Years settings are community based provision with children and families with a lack of bureaucratic hierarchy, sparse funding, and a generally collaborative culture. In the Early Years, leaders are also organisers and administrators in a “hands on” culture (Rodd 2006, p. 10).

In this study, leadership as a concept is informed by the work of the hermeneutic philosopher Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s work (Simms, 2003) focuses on what can be termed the “ethical life” and on the social and relational processes that support the constitution and trajectories of individuals and institutions. Leadership in this study therefore focuses less upon title, position and tasks, and more on relationships and practice and is something which is an

intersubjective construct or a mutually constituted relationship; consistent with aspects of contemporary discourse on the subject (Rosenbach *et al.* 2012).

The general shift towards relational orientations in leadership

Literature on leadership, including women's leadership, charts the move from leadership as position or a set of competencies (Bolden and Gosling, 2006) to views of leadership as a dynamic, situated and relationally constructed activity (Uhl-Bien, 2006). Within this field, Raelin (2011) discusses the idea of “leadership as practice” which “...is concerned far more about *where*, *how* and *why* leadership work is being organised and accomplished than is about who is offering visions for others to do the work” (Ibid. 2011, pp. 195-196).

Within this sub set of leadership literature, several key themes emerge. When seen as a relational activity, leadership is constructed by terms such as sense making, boundary spanning and collaboration. Leadership “sense making” is an activity which responds to the unexplained and unusual situation (Weick 1995, p. 2) viewed as a form of organisational practice. However, sense making literature also focuses on what leaders do to understand context (Ancona *et al.* 2007). Ideas of “relational practices” also feature in organisation studies literature, such as material on (team) “boundary spanning” which addresses activities of connecting and managing 'external' relationships (Ancona and Caldwell 1992; Marrone 2010).

Other literature builds upon a view of work as something that is complex, interconnected and social and discusses practices used by individuals in that context. Edwards (2005) does this by utilising Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) which focuses on collective and interactional aspects of work (Engeström *et al.* 1999; Sannino *et al.* 2009). Edwards (2005) draws on empirical studies of inter-professional collaboration within Children's Services (Daniels *et al.* 2007). Edwards develops the concept of “relational agency”, as a form of “...action with others...” (Edwards 2005, p. 169). Whilst examining individual accounts of experiences, Edwards clearly retains a focus on how individuals relate to collective activity and are object orientated (i.e. purposeful). In this context, she argues “...relational agency is a capacity to work with others to expand the object that one is working on and trying to transform by recognising and accessing the resources that others bring to bear as they interpret and respond to the object.” (Ibid. 2005, p. 172). In this case, relational agency describes a set of practices suited to a complex, social and interconnected activity.

Towards “narrative practices” in leadership

As described, where there is coherence within specific work sectors about leadership competencies, there is an important social or relational element to be considered. A relational view of leadership therefore draws attention to how individuals communicate in social contexts. This paper uses the term “narrative practices” to conceptualise the use of communication in action, or communication *as* action. This sort of “productive talk” is opposed to “talk about” things in a much more passive sense.

The term “narrative practices” is contested within the literature. There is a general distinction between the use of the term “narrative practice” or “narrative based practice”, with the latter referred to as forms of professional practice in fields such as social work, nursing, therapeutic practices (Winslade, 2009) whereas “narrative practices” is generally understood as how individuals form, work with and use their stories of experience and in the context of the social construction of identity (Miller *et al.* 1990; Ochs and Capps 1996; Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Kitayama and Cohen, 2007; De Fina 2008).

Research into “narrative practices” and aspects of leadership is a growing trend, reflecting interest in social and narrative perspectives on leadership, often using the lens of authentic leadership to direct attention to the use of narrative (Avolio and Gardner 2005; Sparrowe 2005; Winkler 2010; Ahn *et al.* 2011). Literature in this field makes important connections between organisational processes and narratives (Quong *et al.* 1999; Reissner 2005; Slater 2011), emphasising the value of narrative within analysis of leadership and organisations. Turner and Mavin (2007) discuss the subjective realities of leaders' life stories and identify links to the approaches taken by leaders in their study, noting that further research into how these are used socially is needed. On this theme, literature can be identified which emphasises the “...relational, social and situated perspective...” of leadership (Kempster and Stewart 2010, p. 205). Of specific interest is work typified by Gherardi and Poggio (2007) which exemplifies the growing interest in issues such as the application of feminist perspectives, experiential reflexivity, narrative knowledge and the interaction of women's narratives. Here, we begin to see a focus beyond the content of leadership narratives towards the use of narrative, and its benefits for meaning making, and “retelling” amongst other things.

Gender, leadership practices and the early years

Within Early Years leadership literature, discussion of women's narrative practices (especially informed by empirical studies of how women lead) is not prominent. Early Years leadership literature is generally task focused (see Moyles, 2006), with limited ethnographic or narrative studies of actual leadership practices. It is argued that discussion of women's narrative practices is further marginalised as “leadership” is still influenced by masculine conceptions of leadership. In their summary of leadership literature in the Early Years, Woodrow and Busch discuss “...the reliance on leadership images drawn from the business world and the gendered nature of the dominant constructions of leadership” (2008, p. 86). Research which does consider women's leadership narratives focuses upon the narrative *content* and not on its use, although there are links to be made. For example, writing on the subject of women leading in the Early Years, Rodd (2006) and Aubrey (2007) discuss empirical narrative research on women's leadership development in the sector, indicating that women had to find ways of leading that worked, including drawing on “experienced others” (2007, p. 73). They have advocated for a definition of leadership as “...a capacity, ability or set of strategies to lead...” (Rodd 2006, p. 14) arguing that such an understanding opens leadership up to women, and which resonates with the idea of “practices” (as opposed to roles, positions or duties) generally.

Educational perspectives dominate discussion of Early Years leadership and are reflected in a range of policy and practice literature (OFSTED, 2008; O'Sullivan, 2009). Publications written by Moyles (2006) and Siraj-Blatchford and Manni (2007) focus on the idea of "effective" leadership and draw on pedagogical studies which explore the characteristics and patterns of effective educational leadership. However, within literature such as this the idea of narrative practices can be identified implicitly. A report written for the Department for Education and Skills, "Researching Effective Leadership in the Early Years" (Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* 2002) did highlight the importance of "leading people" (Ibid. p 13) and drew attention to concepts such as situational leadership and contextual literacy (Southworth 1998, p. 37; Spillane *et al.* 2004) and the task of leadership as being something that is "...collaborative and interdependent..." (Siraj-Blatchford and Manni 2007, p. 11), further developed through discussion of the establishment of shared meaning. Studies however, did not examine how this leadership was *practiced* in successful settings.

An educational focus on leadership practices only captures some of the competencies highlighted for those leading integrated Early Years services. A review of the National Standards for Leaders of Sure Start Children's Centres (Great Britain, DfES, 2007) highlights a range of competencies, and hints at a range of relational or narrative leadership practices addressing themes of leading learning and strengthening teams "...working with and through others..." (Ibid. p. 5). It is argued that these leadership standards represent a policy aspiration and agenda, and are not sufficiently informed by an empirical research base.

Other studies in the same field take account of broader aspects of the role of leader in the Early Years - or "Foundation Years", as they are officially termed in the UK (Great Britain, DfE, 2011) and again point to what is termed here "narrative practices". Here, leadership is defined as being to do with "...those ways of being and ways of acting as a leader in relation to context and people." (Sharp *et al.* 2012, p. 12). This study, titled 'Highly Effective Leadership in Children's Centres' highlights skills such as "engaging in dialogue", developing "a common language", being "open to mutual challenge and support" and working "collaboratively through teamwork".

Lastly, material that critically evaluates the nature of leadership practices in the sector is also rare. Where this does exist, there is a question raised regarding the need to rethink terminology and go beyond gendered stereotypes. For example, Woodrow and Busch discuss the characteristic of an ethic of care in relation to leadership practices they studied (2008, p. 88), although they cite Blackmore (1999) who expresses concern about the use of an ethic of care in terms of potential stereotyping of "feminine" characteristics for leaders. The authors go on to suggest "care" practices could be reconceptualised in terms of four elements: "responsibility", "competence", "interdependence" and "reciprocity" (Woodrow and Busch 2008, p. 89). Here women's leadership practices can be viewed through a political and activist lens, and it is suggested that further studies of narrative practices have potential to speak to such concerns.

A practical philosophy: Ricoeur as a resource for this study

As positioned, research related to women, leadership and narrative practices is a growing field of study with “narrative practices” increasing in relevance as a line of enquiry to address social conceptions of leadership and ethical concerns. The current study collected empirical data which addressed these themes. Before a discussion of the research design and methods, space will be given to discussing the theoretical principles and concepts that framed and articulated it and can be considered to be a “provocative” use of theory articulated by Ramsey (2011), in which theory relates to practice in an interactive way as practitioners engage with it.

The data discussed here is drawn from a wider study into professional identity and practice of Early Years leaders within the North East of England. The study emphasised the unusual and important status of narrative accounts that could say something about the social contexts in which they were shaped and used and drew upon the philosophical hermeneutics of Paul Ricoeur (1984; 1991) as a means of “pointing” towards relational practices currently under researched and under theorised in the field. Only key principles and concepts relevant to the discussion of narrative practices will be outlined here, although the broader study drew on an elaborated theoretical frame.

Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005), as an influential philosopher of the twentieth century produced complex and insightful work drawing on a wide range of philosophical traditions which developed unique insights into issues relating to the will (Ricoeur, 1966), interpretation (Ibid., 1976), metaphor (Ibid., 1978) selfhood (Ibid., 1994), time and narrative (Ibid., 1984) and recognition (Ibid., 2005). Critically, he viewed individuals as agents (Ibid., 1991, p. 109) where action relates people to others and has intention. He developed a theory of language, and of interpretation which dealt amongst other things, with the “...affective and volitional dimensions of human existence” (Thompson, 1981, p. 4), such as action and motive.

In his work on narrative that arguably draws together themes mentioned, as well as his other work both on time and ethics, it is language, as discourse and narrative which forms the basis for his study. In his study of Ricoeur’s work on selfhood, Venema argues that “...understanding and interpretation, the fundamental structures of belonging to a world, take place in and by means of language” (Venema, 2000, p. 30). Narrative therefore “...‘grasps together’ and integrates into one whole and complete story multiple and scattered events, thereby schematising the intelligible signification attached to the narrative taken as a whole” (Ricoeur, 1984, p. x). In short, a use of narrative from this perspective sees empirical data as a text subject to hermeneutic interpretation, but a particular *sort* of interpretation which relates the world of action (in one direction) and both on-going action and reference to its reader. Specifically, Ricoeur provided a model for interpreting and understanding narrative: his mimetic arc (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 53). It is argued that Ricoeur’s mimetic arc provides a dynamic, three phrase model for considering the form and status of narrative. In his model, three phrases are described; prefiguration (where narrative is prefigured in experience), configuration (where narratives are given structure and plot) and refiguration (where narrative is used in on-going action).

Research approach

Accepting contemporary definitions of leadership as being inherently social and viewing narrative texts – as does Ricoeur - as things that are created and used in interactional contexts, then working with narratives has great potential to illuminate the topic of women's narratives practices of leading in the Early Years. Specifically, reference to Ricoeur's idea of the mimetic arc (Ricoeur, 1984, p. 53) focused the study upon the idea that narratives relate to action (prefiguration), are given shape and form (configuration) and especially, are used in on-going action (refiguration). Research conversations therefore discussed participants' stories as they related to action, in other words, the idea of narrative practices.

This paper draws upon the research process with three women who held positions of responsibility within Sure Start Children's Centres. Empirical data was drawn from a participative, narrative study in the North East of England exploring the narrative construction of professional identity and its relationship to practice. The issue discussed in this paper – women's narrative leadership practices – was not the main focus of the research question, but has emerged as a fascinating theme as insights have been gained as to how women use narrative in a sophisticated way to act towards themselves and others. The empirical research presented here draws on a research process undertaken over the course of a year with a small number of individuals who each had some leadership function within different Sure Start Children's Centres in different local authority areas.

Participant "B" was white, forty eight years old and had twenty nine years' experience of working with families. She managed a large team of family support workers and held thematic leadership roles that covered a number of Sure Start Children's Centres within a locality management structure. Participant "D" was forty years old and worked as a Principal Family Worker, with responsibilities for staff and development work for a number of Sure Start Children's Centres. She had ten years of experience of community work, family support and Early Years leadership in her local authority area. Participant "S" was forty seven years old and was a qualified teacher, with leadership and advisory responsibilities within a number of Early Years settings. She had twenty three years of experience in working within Early Years and Primary school settings. All participants were contacted in their capacity as individuals who were known to the author through their participation in the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (National College for School Leadership, 2012) and were therefore familiar with the idea of reflecting on experience utilised in the programme. Participants gave informed consent to participate in the study, which some saw as building upon the process of reflection and leadership development begun in that study although this was not a stated aim of this research.

Working with the individuals required an understanding of a variety of different contexts: different local authority areas, organisational structures, job titles, professional histories and so on. All participants were subject to disruptive organisational restructures in the light of severe budget cuts and all lead within highly complex multi-agency and multi professional fields. In addition, all participants managed complex webs of multiple accountabilities and were dealing with the implications of delivering and working with a developing policy

agenda. The women grappled with issues such as renegotiating and reshaping services, utilising networks of (limited) resources, motivating change and supporting learning amongst staff and well as reconceptualising and re-establishing their professional selves in “new” times.

The research itself was a narrative, participative study operating from an interpretive paradigm. Individuals participated in a series of five extended research conversations with the researcher, lasting two hours, over the course of twelve months. Conversations were broadly structured to reflect the overall study research questions, which were concerned with the relationship between narrative data on professional identity and what was to be termed their “interactional contexts” and dealt with how experiences turn into stories and how stories related to interactional contexts for their creation and use.

Initial sessions tended to be more biographical, with later sessions becoming much more reflective, where participants could work with narratives they had configured, reflecting the concern with using Ricoeur’s idea of the mimetic arc (1984, p. x) which described different “phases” of the narrative life cycle. Throughout, participants actively engaged in the production and analysis of their professional narratives. Visual and interactive methods were utilised (see Figure 1), which acted, together with transcripts of previous sessions, as a basis for data validation, elaboration and sense making activities between the researcher and the researched and for the researched. In this context, during conversations participants actively theorised about how they acted and talked in their work with children, families, those they led, peers, those in more senior positions and the vast array of other types of professional relationships in a multi agency and multi professional environment. Questions asked emerged out of the researcher / participant conversation around themes allocated to each session. A summary of these themes and example questions is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1. Session topics and example questions.

Session theme (Sessions 2-5 included review of cartoons from previous session and stimulated conversation).	Example questions or statements (which emerged and were refined through extended conversation and work with visual elements).
‘Who you are and what you do at work’: Professional Biography.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...how do you explain yourself to people and how do you introduce yourself to people?” “...how would you characterise the relationship with these people, these significant people?” “...if someone was to say to you ‘who are you and what do you do’ and if they were to ask you then, how do you think you would have answered?”
‘How you work with people’: Interactional contexts.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “So you wouldn’t be you without reflection?” “...that idea that you’re... drawing in, gathering, you’re finding... you are collecting, using and it’s more than just what you do it’s who you are..?” “...thinking of a specific interaction you’ve had with a group of practitioners”
‘Putting your story together’: constructing narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “So I’m wondering whether within all of this, the idea that your professional self has to be consistent and coherent is an important thing...” “So you’ve got to live up to your role?”
‘Making sense of the stories’: Review session, looking at narrative experience, configuration and use (see Figure 1).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “So is there a reason why it’s em...it’s further...is distance from the centre meaningful in the way you are arranging things here at all?” “What’s important about the ‘right now’?” “Are there any cartoons that just seem a little bit odd, or out of place?”
Conclusion: validation, process review, co-analysis, co-theorising.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “...imagine you were to put together a little cartoon strip that sort of had... ‘this is what my story has been about’: how would you have summarised it?” “It’s like you’re having to constantly having to reinterpret what’s going on, where are you in it, and what are you going to tell people?” “...is it that you have to make it yours, you have to personalise it?”

Figure 1. Photograph from a review session with one participant, illustrating use of summary cartoons and interactive annotation. Cartoons were drawn by the author to select key sections of narrative transcribed from research conversations and were used as a basis for further discussion, relating to one another and the Ricoeur's three phase structure of the mimetic arc.



Specific analysis of narrative data was undertaken with participants, between sessions four and five and after the fifth and final session. Analysis considered narrative reference to activity at each stage of the mimetic arc (Ricoeur, 1984), including detailed discussion of the shaping and application of narratives in the context of interaction with others. As such, initial analysis, or hermeneutic activity, was undertaken within the research conversations with participants. The structure of the mimetic arc, which can be seen traced out in figure one in pen, supported the development of narrative accounts about professional dialogue undertaken by participants. Framed and conceptualised in this way, participants considered narrative practice as something that was dynamic, interactive and situated.

Over the course of five conversations within twelve months, a large amount of data was produced in the form of transcriptions of audio recordings and photographic recording of visual configuration work with cartoons and participant annotations. As previously mentioned, a focus on the idea of narrative practice was highlighted in the process of analysis which began in sessions and was continued into analysis undertaken by the researcher, alongside work relating to the substantive study into narratives of professional identity. Once this was highlighted, analysis involved selecting all data that could be coded as relating to the

idea of “narrative practice” previously discussed, then using NVivo software to code within this data to produce a set of fifteen initial codes (see Figure 2). Interpretation of the narrative data began with descriptive explanation (in this case, understanding individual quotes in context) but moved through increasingly complex reflection and cross referencing on the part of the researcher, towards a richer understanding, reflecting the movement from explanation to understanding in Ricoeur’s mimetic arc (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. 52-87). Understanding connections and relations between initial codes, supported by repeated readings and note making facilitated the development of higher level codes. The focus of analysis within this paradigm was not to describe causal relationships or produce generalisable theory, but to engage hermeneutically with the data to focus on meaning and understanding. The “test” (as such) applied to the interpretation was one of how convincing or *acceptable* it was, in the light of understanding of the narrative generally (Ricoeur, 1984, pp. 150-152). This process of validation was one that was built in to the research methodology, as participants were actively involved in accepting, rejecting or retelling summaries of their narrative work (in the case of this topic, what narrative practices they used and why) in the process of conversation itself, as well as reflective work with cartoon images in subsequent sessions providing a reading of “moments” and themes in the data selected by the researcher based on data previously collected.

Findings and discussion

Through the process of coding a set of three high level categories of narrative practices were identified by the researcher. These, together with the sub categories that constituted them, are summarised in table 2. A discussion of these high level categories of narrative practices follows tables 2 and 3.

Table 2: Coding hierarchy summary for data.

Narrative practices codes level 1	Narrative practices codes level 2	Narrative practices summary	Contrasting ‘Masculine’ leadership practices		
Establishing shared meaning	Co-construction.	‘Tent-making’ (skills for creating and using spaces together).	Contrasted with territorial or transactional leadership styles.		
Collective and collaborative					
Valuing narrative space					
Remembering and weaving					
Using biography	Bonding: making meaningful connections.				
Authenticity					
Learning from talk	Awareness work.	Narrative adaptation (sophisticated manoeuvring, skilled dancing)	Contrasted with leadership focused on positioning and overwhelming goal orientation.		
Self-talk	Attuned adjustment.				
Signalling					
Motivational					
Refocusing, changing perspective	Understanding narrative as a resource	Narrative reflexivity (awareness of own narrative practice / as a resource)	Contrasted with ‘leadership as position’, less self-aware.		
Adapting narrative strategies					
Using stories	Focusing				
Tailoring					
Modes of talk					

Table 3: Initial coding structure with example narrative.

Narrative practices initial codes with example narrative (15)	Second level 'narrative practices' codes (6)
<p>Establishing Shared Meaning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “when you’re trying to get somebody on board, and you get them with a shared vision about thinking differently just for a minute and visualising something different” B “...but that’s why I think it’s important that we establish at the minute who we are, what we’re doing, are then how we can work everything out” D <p>Collective collaborative</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I think you’ve put the bare bones on the table and then listen to other people’s ideas and contributions and talk about the strengths of them and the weaknesses around them and listen to other people’s contributions in terms of what they would do differently to you, I suppose.” B “Well, how I see it is that, well, obviously I’m the leader, and I come with lots and lots of experience...but also there’s things that they have that I do not have and so I think it’s more about a...there’s a balance of, ‘yes, this is me and I’ll lead the way’ kind of thing, and ‘this is how I like to see it’, but let’s see what you’ve got...” B “That’s too egocentric for me, and it’s also acknowledging other people’s expertise, it’s going back to that store of knowledge and how you give and take with your practitioners...” S <p>Narrative space</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “If you’ve had a busy session, you stick your head round the door and you help us clear up and you chat with us... and they <i>don’t</i>.” S “...but it’s about taking time to unpick a challenge, because you’re more likely to get that answer right first time, rather than false starts that may take two or three times longer than had you spent ten minutes rather than five minutes, and it’s just little things like that.” S “...when I said ‘no’ to those practitioners, it kind of threw them but it actually opened, because I sort of said to them ‘how do you feel you get on with observation?’ ...and the floodgates opened. ...and then after a pause, someone said, we’ve never had a chance to voice this before. They wouldn’t have done that if I’d have...because...” S 	Co-construction.
<p>Remembering and weaving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “So if you’re saying, you know, you’re talking about a subject, you repeat the subject back to them: ‘so what happened next...?’ – show that you’re listening. Is it that, and that you circulate yourself it’s not just the one person, it’s how you work the room...” S “I think when you’re put in a situation where you don’t really know what’s going to happen, what’s going on, you’re kind of just, you just kind of find it out yourself but if I was a person who didn’t do that and didn’t go and speak to people and didn’t kind of mix very well, well I...wouldn’t be in the job that I’m doing now and I wouldn’t have got on as much as what I have and I definitely through...through me gob!” D <p>Using biography</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “So, you could be in a situation of discussing something and remember something that was...past and seems to be appropriate time to share and it might be that it connects with what you’re talking about.” B “I know, it’s going to be that kind of ‘have you tried’ rather than ‘do it’ because if you can come back to your own experience and say ‘this is what I’ve tried...’” S “But I like them to know that I’ve been in situations so I’m not talking...we’re back to the incompetence thing, that I’m talking competently about and I understand where they’re coming from.” B <p>Authenticity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “to trust, to be able to trust those people, to be able to build those relationships just to be able to know that where you stand, I think if you’re not open and honest and you cannot trust that person then I... I... would find it really hard to work with them.” D “I don’t need to change the fact that I am open and honest, that I do talk a lot, but I do talk a lot in the right way, that’s almost like saying that I talk a lot about rubbish things, but I talk because that’s how I get on with people, I network, that’s how I...that’s how people get to know me.” D 	Bonding: making meaningful connections.
<p>Learning from talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I think being able to work with certain people, just learn from other people, and I don’t want it to stop” B “No, but, I just feel more confident in dealing with them, cos they’ve got maybe a similarity ...and I know it’s right because I’ve maybe had a conversation before...” B “getting to know them, that’s very much where I felt I didn’t know where I fit in....sussing each other out, it was almost be that kind of ‘who are you?’ ...’do you know who I am?’...” D <p>Self talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> “I just go ‘right, I am worried about that bit over there, but I’m going to park it there, and I’m going to check in at break time there’s nowt I can do with that there ‘till after work, so I’ll just pop it there: I park things, that’s what I do.” B “I think there’s been a couple of times where I have, I’ve just thought I’ve had enough and ‘oh, I’m not doing it anymore’ but then, within five minutes, I’m fine...but that’s possibly through talking, through telling stories, through other people telling stories to me.” D 	Awareness work.

<p>Signalling</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I’ve said to them, when I’m stressed, this is how I’ll appear, or, this is how you may see me – yeah, I’ve done that, because I think sometimes I think it comes as a bit of a surprise to people how different you are, and I’ve said ‘I may look busy, I may look like I’m running around but you know, I am approachable and don’t be scared to pick up the phone’...” B • “...having to tell people that this is who I am, this is what I do, this is mine, but I don’t want to feel too precious about it either, because I will work with other people, but I just think that it is important that people know what it is that I do.” D • “I suppose if you ever meet a professional for the first time, you give your name, your title, but you might also give a cheeky grin at the end because people then usually say ‘what does that involve?’ – it’s almost like flirting, isn’t it?” S 	<p>Attuned adjustment.</p>
<p>Motivational</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I guess then I suppose in a way I am empowering them to be what they want to be, so if you don’t have those conversations with them, you don’t go out, you don’t speak to them on the phone and you don’t go and see them face to face... it’s like you’re never going to get them there” D • “I think that’s why I’m conscious of this particular practitioner she’s thinking beyond, and you kind of want to mentor that person to say... almost giving them a hand up, cumon, quick, hoyking them up and saying, yeah, you can do it.” S 	
<p>Refocusing / changing perspective</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “If I’ve got awkward conversations to have I will always take it back to the children” S • “I use humour in situations, but I would hope to think that the story I told about, you know, being threatened by a knife and my reaction – the parable and the learning from that is please do not expect your body to do what you think it will do cos it won’t – you will react differently to what you think you will...” B 	
<p>Adapting narrative strategies</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The practitioner will say ‘oh, well, they went to the play dough’ and I’ll say ‘yeah, and... and what, what happened then?’ so it’s that... but because I’m obviously typing here I can’t <i>possibly</i>... but you can see them, out of the corner of your eye.” S • “So it was all about people skills and interaction [yeah] and being approachable and all of that and then at (place) it was chairing meetings that involved a lot of multi-agency, community people who were involved in that so it wasn’t anything I was used to I just had to transfer some of the skills.” B • “You see, with parents it would just be I was a single parent and I went to university blah de blah and done that whereas I suppose with professionals it would be yes, I’ve done a masters and I’ve done this, and I’ve worked in this role for ten years and I guess it would be more about the work that I’ve done. Whereas for parents they get a life story, I guess of where I started and this is where I am now – anybody can do it.” D 	<p>Understanding narrative as a resource</p>
<p>Using stories</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...the stories I tell are around families and for a purpose.” B • “I think for me, it’s important for people to see me as being approachable and someone who they can come and talk to but also being about getting down and working and being a worker and doing me job, em... and I think it’s also important for people to see how passionate I am and I think that definitely has come across of late.” D • “I think in a way it’s almost having the confidence to show the real you and sharing your experiences with practitioners. And when they say ‘well, that didn’t go very well’ – ‘yeah, do you know, I had a similar experience’ and about showing that side but saying to them the fact that you know it didn’t go very well and the fact that you thought about it and you reflected on it and you’re going to do it differently makes you different to a practitioner who doesn’t even know something’s gone wrong, or knows something’s gone wrong but...” S 	
<p>Tailoring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You’re not going to interact the same with everybody, are you. But I know (person) I don’t interact with her the same way, cos she likes lots of detail, and I know that...” B • “...but I still have that relationship with them where we can have a bit laugh and a bit carry on... but I think for me, if I was to always kinda perceive meself as being more hierarchical that anybody else, then I don’t think I would get...I wouldn’t get it out of them.” D 	<p>Focusing</p>
<p>Modes of talk</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “...actually I think I could give you an example, because I’ve used it in a different situation, it’s good in a crisis, because it keeps you focused, because your work hat doesn’t have much emotion in it...” B • “...you know, everyday’s an adventure and all of that and everything’s different and very diverse and very interchangeable, blah, blah, blah; when it comes to meetings, I don’t like straying from the beaten track.” B 	

Theme 1: “Tent-making”

Establishing shared meaning	Co-construction.	“Tent Making” (skills for creating and using spaces together).
Collective and collaborative		
Valuing narrative space		
Remembering and weaving	Bonding: making meaningful connections.	
Using biography		
Authenticity		

Throughout the data coded to narrative practices, women participants gave multiple examples of what is termed here “Tent Making” narrative practices in their leadership. This term is used to describe the skills for creating and using symbolic and narrative space with others used as a resource for productive action together. One may read the data as a story of “putting up” a tent, and taking time around the campfire to skilfully support the process of shared story construction. In this metaphor, women while discussing their leadership demonstrated recognition of the need to view understanding as something co-constructed, not told. This relied on establishing a sense of shared meaning (Wertsch, 1991, p. 30). A wide range of narrative strategies were utilised to establish this sense of shared meaning including the introduction of alternative metaphors for activity, the provision of contextual plots which could be used to define actors, actions and meanings and also the communication of their own subject position which could be used by others in their own actions. In terms of the mimetic arc, these practices represent an understanding of what *others* needed in order to configure and refigure plots for action.

The metaphor of “Tent Making” and campfire conversations can also be used to consider the context in which these practices were used. Just as Ricoeur saw the mimetic arc more correctly as a spiral moving forward in time (Ricoeur 1984, p. 72), participants demonstrated an awareness of the need to talk together and develop over time. This was recognised as a productive undertaking, as shared understanding needed to be constructed together, in contrast to telling or giving instructions which did not equip staff with a rich set of references for action (Thompson 1981, p. 208). Finally, narrative practices to establish shared meaning were not presented in cynical terms: the necessity of acknowledging others was often acknowledged, with an understanding of the need to value contributions and use power differently.

Theme 2: Narrative adaptation

Learning from talk.	Awareness work.	Narrative adaptation (skilled dancing)
Self-talk.		
Signalling.	Attuned adjustment.	
Motivational.		
Refocusing, changing perspective.		

A second theme in the narrative practices data was that of “adaptation”. Within this theme, women leaders in Early Years services used narrative practices that enabled them to work with a dynamic environment requiring and benefited from sophisticated manoeuvring. For some, narrative practice used significant personal details from others offered over time, skilfully re-contextualising and applying these to emphasise relevance of the current

conversation. Participants also used “self-talk” to adapt, frame and compartmentalise their own narratives, reflecting a desire for personal and professional narratives to be authentic, coming from regular narrative assessment of their situations. In part, these strategies were needed because of the complexities involved in managing the boundaries between home life (where all were conscious of care or parenting responsibilities) and work.

Participants saw the need to be adaptive in their use of narrative specifically because talk was viewed as an action, not as a precursor to it or reflection upon it – a relationship similar to that which Ricoeur constructed between action and mimetic (representative) narrative (Simms 2003, p. 80). In addition, the constructive status of narrative is clearly reflected here. Women often recognised this was needed because other forms of power or legitimacy were not open to them as they operated in culturally, organisationally and administratively complex contexts, with multiple accountabilities and layers of formal management above them. One effect of viewing talk “as work” or action seemed to be to sensitise participants to the ethical dimension of this action: to consider the effects dialogue may have upon others. Generally, narrative practices in this theme could relate to the metaphor of a skilled dance, where participants improvised, remembered and communicated whilst dancing *together* with others. Perhaps it is suitable that metaphors such as this can be found in work on narrative therapy (White, 1993), reflecting its emotional and relational aspects.

Theme 3: Narrative reflexivity

Adapting narrative strategies	Understanding narrative as a resource	Narrative reflexivity (awareness of own narrative practice / conducting and orchestration)
Using stories		
Tailoring	Focusing	
Modes of talk		

In this theme, a metaphor of conducting an orchestra is reflected: participants discussed narrative practices in which they used dialogue as a mechanism for “attuning” themselves to those they led. They demonstrated an awareness of when *not* to talk - when to hold back in order to support the rhythm of dialogue and its mutual construction. This was not simply telling or directing, although participants often talked about an awareness of the trajectory they intended for the conversation or the individuals they spoke to. This intentionality left room for mutual configuration of stories, where participants and those they worked with constructed the process together. Awareness of the process of narrative configuration was important, relating to the idea of reflexive narrative practice.

Although he goes on to a helpful discussion of ways in which it can be transcended, Holland gives a definition of reflexivity which is “...applied to that which turns back upon, or takes account of itself or a person’s self , especially methods that take into consideration the effect of the personality or presence of the researcher on the investigation.” (Holland 1999, p. 464). In this context, using the idea of narrative reflexivity involved moving beyond the simple delivery of a *script* and instead focused attention on how participants were sensitised to those narrative strategies that were needed and desirable at that time. In other words, participants

demonstrated awareness of potential resources they had *and* ways of telling, and both were selected through reflexive narrative practices to ensure relevance and appropriateness.

Narrative practice “in the light of” masculine leadership cultures

Three high level themes relating to narrative practices, drawn from the data in this study, highlight how these women used talk to co-construct (as tent makers), adapt (as skilled dancers) and practice reflexively (as orchestrators). Not once did participants define their practices in terms of official management practice or culture. Instead, participants frequently defined their narrative practices in opposition to dominant organisational and management practices and cultures. These were practices that drew on personal biography, and an ethical approach to “working with” others, and as such were *their* narrative practices. Participants’ practices were in sharp contrast to legitimised or formal approaches such as bureaucratic ways of working (e.g. form filling and procedures), formality (e.g. how relationships were made and maintained) and more coercive uses of power (e.g. application of “rules” and leadership as “telling”).

This paper began with the suggestion that women in this study worked within masculine organisational cultures and practices. Whilst it is unhelpful to characterise organisations or forms of leadership as *either* “masculine” or “feminine” (Bowring 2004; Maura *et al.* 2012), contemporary literature on the topic of gender in management maintains that “The world of management is strongly dominated by men – and leadership is, or at least used to be, conventionally constructed mainly in masculine terms...” (Kyriakidou, 2012, p. 4). A gendered argument may be constructed in relation to this study – focusing as it does on women’s narrative practices. Regardless of the officially neutral tone of organisational cultures, leadership practices are gendered and this gendering occurs through the performance of leadership (Butler, 1996, p. 112). The appearance of gender neutrality in leadership cultures requires further critical investigation: there are a number of ways in which leadership practices may clearly be gendered, but not formally recognised as such. In her review of masculine leadership behaviours, Schnurr (2008, p. 304) draws attention to the argument that the language of leadership and language of masculinity have become synonymous. This lack of distinction leads to an uncritical acceptance of gendered leadership practices, which may act to oppress women. In their development of a “gender lens” in relation to leadership, Patterson *et al* (2012) review material by Walby (1989) which presents patriarchal systems as made up of social structures and practices of male dominance. In addition, Mavin *et al* (2004) also discuss the nature of male dominated social contexts, and the patriarchal design of organisations. These things result in “gendered” organisations, but this is often not identified or its implications questioned.

Attention drawn to gendered organisational language and practices and the gendered nature of organisational cultures is very relevant this study. It would be naïve to suggest that women in these alternative sites (Sure Start Children’s Centres) are isolated from “masculine” leadership cultures, or the structures and systems which reflect them. Far from being autonomous, Sure Start Children’s Centres are part of local authority departments or large voluntary sector organisations, and as such are directed by, and accountable to very different

organisational contexts and cultures. The work of women leaders in these centres may be incorrectly stereotyped as “feminine”, reflecting socially constructed ideas of care (Blackmore, 1999) but this is neither accurate, nor does it account for the influence of wider masculine organisational and leadership cultures. For women in this study, the implications are significant. Mavin *et al* (2004, p. 567) argue that this “gender blindness” in organisations results in the marginalisation of women. Further, Patterson *et al* (2012, p. 690) draw attention to the resulting pressure for women to conform to expectations linked to gender stereotypes. Women leaders in this study were very aware that in adopting certain narrative practices they were rejecting or even subverting dominant organisational cultures, their descriptions of which reflected stereotypically masculine characteristics. Choices to adopt different practices often led to women in this study questioning their legitimacy in the light of dominant practices, reflecting their lack of formal endorsement from the organisation.

In this study, narrative practices have been identified which clearly “go against the grain” of implicitly gendered organisational cultures. The fact that these practices are to an extent hidden by these women leaders who are conscious of their status reflects their marginalisation. However, there is a need to identify, share and support many aspects of practices outlined in this paper as they offer a welcome alternative to unhelpfully gendered stereotypes of leadership. Further, these women’s narrative practices are in their own way proactive, challenging and assertive, offering distinct advantages in terms of leadership adaptability, ethical sensitivity and sustainability. It is argued these practices do not fall into the trap identified by Fletcher (2004), whereby women’s practice of “postheroic” leadership, characterised by shared and distributed practice (Ibid. p. 648); a social process of interactions (Ibid. p. 649) and learning (Ibid. p. 649), still remain subject to the unequal power relationships established by gender stereotypes. Findings identified in this study reflect many aspects of “postheroic” leadership but avoid stereotypically feminine associations of “powerlessness” and “selfless giving” (Ibid. p. 654) identified by Fletcher. This study finds women who collaborate and recognise others whilst also being purposeful, assertive and agentic in their leadership.

In terms of contributions to contemporary debates about gender in management, this paper has presented important insights from an alternative site of women’s leadership. By making narrative actions the subject of an empirical study, rather than solely a medium to describe women’s experiences, the study has empowered women to recognise and articulate a radical set of narrative practices, in the light of comparisons made by women themselves of gendered organisational practices that surround them. It is argued that one barrier to the recognition and utilisation of such practices are the organisational leadership cultures that could be described as transactional, cognitively biased, formal and unresponsive: traits associated with traditional “masculine” leadership within the literature (Eagly *et al*, 2003). These are traits which stand in contrast to the practices discussed here. Narrative practices illustrated in this study offer a distinct set of advantages for services that need to be responsive and ethical and have the potential to be considered as a source of leadership innovation. Whether they are recognised, appreciated and supported will be linked to a

broader debate about the need to reject the gendered leadership practices that currently resist them.

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